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SUBJECT: PT Insiders Say Don't Count Dilma Out

REF: BRASILIA 1250; RECIFE 66; (08) SAO PAULO 581

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Workers Party (PT) insiders acknowledge Dilma Rousseff's 2010 presidential candidacy has run into some problems, but express confidence her campaign will rebound. Across a series of recent meetings, PT leaders in Sao Paulo say Dilma can come from behind and beat likely PSDB nominee Jose Serra. They, as well as some non-PT contacts, argue that the press is too negative on Dilma and Lula can work his vote-transfer magic in Dilma's favor (despite his failure to do the same for PT Sao Paulo Mayoral candidate Marta Suplicy in November 2008 -- Ref C). They also suggest the PT's alliance with the Brazil's largest party, the PMDB, will guarantee ample TV time, that wild-card candidate Ciro Gomes will make a perfect attack dog against Jose Serra (Ref B) and, perhaps most significant, that the PT has a strategy for outreach to Christian voters, both Catholic and Evangelical. End Summary.

Dilma's Rousseff: Looking More Vulnerable

¶2. (U) Despite strong support from a popular President, Dilma Rousseff's candidacy as the PT's presumptive nominee has yet to take off. Her pre-campaign has been beset with a number of obstacles, including: a cancer scare, a dust-up over alleged exaggerations in her resume, a problem with the tax authorities, and, most recently, weak poll results that showed possible PSB candidate Ciro Gomes polling slightly ahead of her and gave a wide lead to her most likely opponent, Sao Paulo Governor Jose Serra (Refs A-C). Compounding Dilma's apparent difficulties are broader, PT-related problems, most notably President Lula's vigorous defense of PMDB ally Senator Jose Sarney against corruption charges and the subsequent departure of former PT stalwart and Environment Minister Marina Silva from the party in August to run as the Green Party (PV) presidential candidate.

¶3. (SBU) The pile-up of dim news for Dilma caused one local PMDB-oriented pundit, Gaudencio Torquato, to tell Poloff recently that he was revising his ideas on Rousseff's chances. Just a few months ago, Torquato had considered Rousseff a shoe-in to win the presidency citing a long list of popular programs -- Bolsa Familia, Minha Casa (My House), cuts in taxes for car purchases, as well as the plans to distribute oil revenues from the pre-sal deposits off Rio de Janeiro State -- as well as the backing of a popular president. Nonetheless, she remains stuck in the polls and the PT apparently has no "plan B," according to Torquato. He stated that,

while it was too early to write Dilma off, her candidacy seemed far more fragile than just a few months ago. Compounding these programs, Torquato said, is Dilma's difficult personality and lack of experience in national politics.

#### PT Regulars Dismiss the Doubts/Describe the Strategy

14. (SBU) PT insiders dismiss these doubts and radiate confidence that Dilma Rousseff, with President Lula's help, can win the presidency. Their assurances appear to reflect more than just the party loyalty. In discussions with various PT insiders, they laid out cogent arguments that could underpin a come-from-behind second-round win for Dilma based on several factors, the most novel of which is the PT's ongoing efforts to court Christian voters, both Catholics and Evangelicals. Among the chief reasons they cited for optimism:

-Many of Dilma's troubles are nothing more than a press meme. The media, in the words of Walter Pomar, like to report every problem Dilma confronts as a "fatal bullet" that will do in her candidacy.

-The Lula-Transfer Factor: President Lula retains sky-high popularity and can be expected to accompany Rousseff on constant attempts to showcase government programs, events that will, in the words of PT State Deputy Rui Falcao, "bathe Dilma in the people." When Poloff noted President Lula's failure to help PT candidate Marta Suplicy win the November 2008 Sao Paulo Mayor's race (despite strenuous efforts - Ref A), PT representatives dismissed the comparison. PT International Relations Secretary Walter Pomar said that Sao Paulo has always been tough territory for Lula and the PT, and that this limited Lula's ability to help Suplicy. Once a national campaign begins in earnest, the Lula campaign machine will begin to roll and, particularly in the Northeast, PT insiders believe the vote transfer from Lula to Dilma will be very high.

-Television Time: PT contacts seemed somewhat embarrassed by President Lula's September defense of Jose Sarney. They acknowledged, however, that "it was all about TV time." The PMDB brings TV time to its alliance with the PT, and this will be a crucial factor favoring Dilma in the campaign.

-Ciro Gomes as Hatchet Man: PT insiders professed joy at Gomes possible candidacy (Ref B). They stated that Gomes does not like Governor Serra and will go after him, opening up a second flank that Serra will have to cover. At the same time, they seemed doubtful that Gomes could control his own rhetoric enough to reach the second round. In any case, without large amounts of TV time, Gomes' cannot upset the basic two-way nature of the PT-PSDB race.

-The Religion Factor: In recent years, the PT has worked out a careful balancing act with both its Catholic Church supporters and the new, rising Evangelical Churches, according to Pomar. Catholic support for the PT is historical, but as the party has gained support among Evangelicals, the Catholic Church had cooled to the PT. PT insiders maintain the party has countered with a unified strategy to smooth relations on both fronts. PT City Councilman for Sao Paulo Jose Americo cited a recent concordat signed between Lula and the Vatican as a key strategic move to placate Catholics. (Note: President Lula signed the concordat in question in November 2008 and the Senate approved it on October 8 of this year. Among several planks, it guarantees continued Catholic education in the public schools. End Note.) Americo also lauded the potential political influence of popular Charismatic Catholics, often represented by young priests who sing or are talented entertainers, and strong potential vote-mobilizers for the PT. PT State Deputy Rui Falcao added that the GOB had recently widened its advertising.

Formerly limited to Catholic publications, the GOB is now putting public service messages in publications put out by the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, UCG), a controversial Evangelical Church that has sometimes been investigated by the government for corruption. The UCG owns Brazil's second largest television network.

15. (SBU) The PT would appear to be putting the religion strategy into practice. Dilma Rousseff participated in the annual two-million person religious procession of the C????rio of Nazar???? in Belem on October 11. The candidate admitted that she had never attended such an event before. She expressed surprise that many of the faithful carried miniature houses or even bricks in their hands, in hopes of receiving a place to live, according to press reports. During the same trip, Dilma also met with Evangelicals. She indicated to journalists that her religious outreach would not end with this one visit because "In Brazil, this [popular religious feeling] can't be contained." (NOTE: Post plans to report more on religion and the upcoming elections septel. END NOTE.)

Comment:

16. (SBU) The confidence of PT insiders regarding Dilma Rousseff's candidacy appears to be based on more than just the party line. Their logic for, among other things, a powerful Lula vote-transfer at the national level (particularly in the northeast) and an intelligent strategy of outreach to Christians, both Catholic and Evangelical, is understandable. Likewise, Dilma can count on both the resources of her party and a popular President to help her in the lengthy contest to reach Planalto. Nonetheless, Dilma's lack of personal charisma, apparent limited personal connection with influential religious voters, and lingering doubts about her health and overall presidential credentials will remain challenges for her campaign. End Comment.  
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